Communicating impact: the role of news and media — reflections on reaching non-academic audiences.

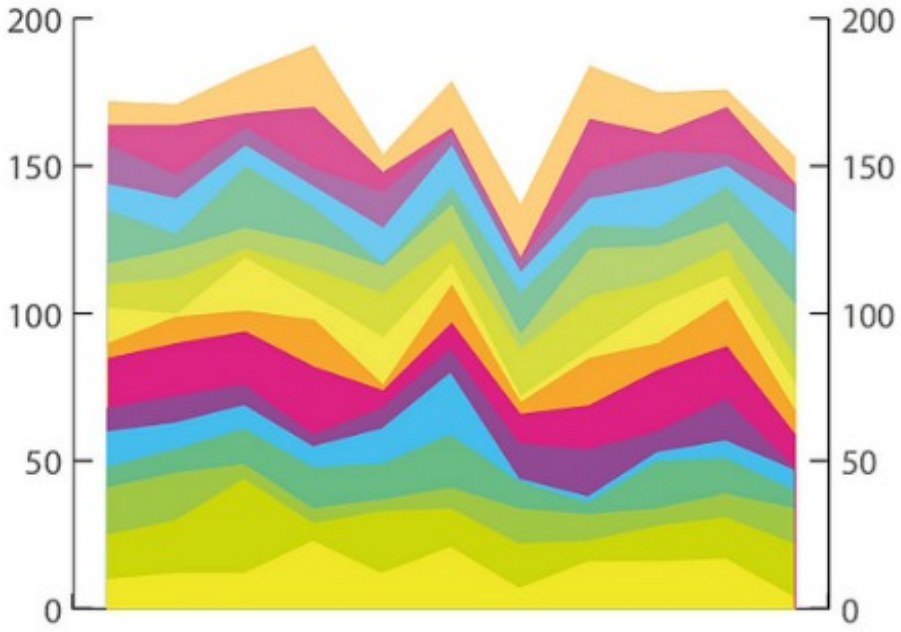
The following reflections are from speakers at today's one-day workshop, Communicating impact: the role of news and media hosted by The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). The workshop is part of the ESRC's capacity-building programme for the Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) community and focuses on ways in which the research community can communicate research findings and expert analysis most effectively, and to connect with non-academic audiences to maximise opportunities for impact. For more on the event, see here.

The sociology of research-generated knowledge and 'evidence' is desperately under-developed

Is knowledge really so evanescent, the history of ideas so impenetrable that we can't get a better grip on how much and how far yesterday's research may still be present today? **David Walker** *discusses the difficulties of knowledge making an impact in decision-making processes and our limited understanding of how this process occurs.*

The way social science knowledge succeeds in 'shaping society/economy/culture' is barely understood. We are a long, long way off claiming that research is *causal*. The literature opens vignettes on the relationship between knowledge and practice, between knowledge, attitudes, opinion and behaviour but – accepting it is rarely if ever linear – we often haven't much of an inkling whether or not people (especially policymakers) act on the basis of *what they know*, let alone how they found out what they think they know. Instead there's lots of assertion; impact now has an established rhetoric. Yet the sociology of research-generated knowledge and 'evidence' is desperately under-developed: a few more ESRC research centres would not go amiss.

It sometimes seems as if social science doesn't actually want to know whether it has a being and personality outside academic confines. My recent book *Exaggerated Claims – the ESRC 50 years on* sketches a history from which self-reflexivity is largely absent. Just how far does a half century's investment in social science research register in UK national life? I can offer, as you can, intuitive suggestions but hard evidence?



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It's a besetting sin of British journalism that we know so little about our impact (and our practices and proprietors for that matter). But you might think that over the years the processes of academic knowledge creation, dissemination and, that word again, *impact* would have been intensively studied. Is that because numbers of academics remain indifferent and resent being forced by funders to go through the hoops of describing and assessing the significance of their work, beyond the standard academic indicators?

Perhaps there's a residual unhappiness with the messiness and compromises of politics and public management, which inhibits closer understanding of whether and how academic research has a life outside peer-reviewed journals. Metaphors abound to capture the ways knowledge enters consciousness (unconsciously) but empirical studies of policy cognition are scarce. How many times do writers lazily cite that passage from Keynes about decision makers in business catching something from the air that in fact stems from 'academic scribblers' way back? Is knowledge really so evanescent, the history of ideas so impenetrable that we can't get a better grip on how much and how far yesterday's research may still be present today? Perhaps – heretical thought – social science knowledge is only fitfully cumulative; it is instead episodic, context-dependent, dependent on institutions, immanent – not (as 'science' believes) transcendent.

Where are the retrospective 'Agatha Christie' narratives, in which policy actors are asked what they knew and when. Who dunnit, in terms of the data and analysis; did such and such an article ever get read by the under-secretary let alone the special adviser or the influential thinktank director?

The academic temperament tends towards the nomothetic, the establishment of general rules and modelling. Anything else, they fear, is history or consultancy. So we see lots of time and attention paid to the 'science' of impact. Yet much policymaking (like government) is idiographic. Knowledge is deployed specifically to make a case, to buttress a decision: its value is contingent on time and place.

And that points to the toughest question in the conversation around impact. In which direction does the arrow travel? Is it evidence/research *for policy* or the untidy scrabbling of policymakers and those who influence them (including journalists) in bran tubs of knowledge? If we start with the policymakers and their frameworks and work back, we may not get anywhere near disciplines or research programmes or even academic institutions. Even the metaphor of a kaleidoscope misses the scrappiness by which shards of knowledge and understanding enter the policy process.

What is the Education Media Centre?

Fran Abrams *provides an overview of the day-to-day activities of the Education Media Centre, an independent charity that looks to highlight academic voices on national news stories related to education.*

Could universities do more to widen participation by helping poor students at school, instead of investing in bursaries? Does free nursery education get mothers back to work? What's the best way to raise school attainment – a literacy initiative, or a hot lunch? These are all questions which the Education Media Centre focused on in its first two years.

The EMC was launched in November 2013 with Baroness Estelle Morris as its founding patron. Its aim is to 'make evidence make news,' and it's the UK's first independent source of media-friendly, quality-assured research evidence on education. The centre is a charity run by journalists with many years' experience working for the national news media.

The EMC is an independent charity, run day to day by two staff members. We have a wide range of funders and no paying clients who could influence our work or taint our impartiality. Our trustees have all made outstanding achievements in either education journalism or research. We are served by a panel of research advisors who help us identify leading experts – a list of their names is on our website.

Image credit: Behind the scenes at *The Newshour*, during a Gen. Peter Pace interview. Public Domain

Our job is to ensure that when an education story is breaking, the voices of authoritative academic experts get heard. We do this in three main ways:

1. **Breaking news reactions**

Timely, short, media-friendly quotations from respected academics on the evidence behind the news. We specialise in anticipating the news agenda so we can email experts' quotes to national journalists before their deadlines.

For example: When an independent commission highlighted the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged pupils going to university, we sent two expert comments to the media. They were picked up by The Guardian, The Independent, The Huffington Post and, via the Press Association, 64 local online newspaper sites.

1. **Live briefings**

Press conferences, organised and hosted by us, at which journalists hear from a panel of experts about cutting-edge education research. Among the organisations which have chosen to partner with us to communicate their evidence to the media are the OECD, Wellcome Trust, Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

For example: When the Wellcome Trust and EEF launched a multi-million pound research project about how neuroscience might improve teaching and learning, we hosted the press briefing. The story was covered in the The Telegraph, The Guardian, The Independent, The Times, Financial Times and the Daily Mail, among others. The BBC's Today programme, BBC 5Live and BBC World News all picked it up, and more than 120 articles appeared in regional newspapers or online sites.

1. **Setting the news agenda**

We help independent experts to make sure their evidence has the highest possible profile. By connecting academics with our contacts in the media, we aim to help foster a stronger, more evidence-based education system.

For example: When the government introduced a calculator ban in SAT tests, we helped academics from Oxford, Cambridge, King's College London and Cambridge Assessment to highlight research evidence which showed calculators help, rather than hindering, pupils' maths achievement. They received coverage on the BBC's Breakfast and Newsround programmes as well as on BBC 5Live. The Daily Telegraph picked up the story along with a host of regional media, and an article on the BBC's website attracted 344 comments.

EMC – The first two years in numbers

- We issued 143 breaking news reactions.
- Around 500 quotations from our experts were quoted in the regional, national and international media.
- We gave 10 live briefings with 170+ attendees.

Radio – your new best friend?

Academic work, ideas and expert comments are essential to, perhaps even the bedrock, of many successful radio programmes. Here, **Dinah Lammiman** *provides helpful tips for academics interested in getting involved further with radio broadcast and how to build long-lasting, mutually productive relationships with broadcast producers.*

Speech radio has hours and hours of broadcasting space to fill and producers need interesting, intelligent ideas and speakers to do that. So, if it appeals to you, this could be your opportunity to get your work and/or yourself out there, into the public arena, and have a bit of fun doing it. But, before embarking on your broadcasting career, get an understanding of who you're getting into bed with and, I would gently suggest, thoroughly examine your motives.

BBC Radio is the biggest market for speech radio and BBC Radio 4 is perhaps the most compatible with academia. But, if you have a fantastic new take on popular culture there's no reason why Radio 2 couldn't become your channel and there are also multiple opportunities on local radio. Radio 4 has a few different kinds of speech

programmes – live news shows, pre-recorded discussions, crafted documentaries – and covers a huge range of material from gardening tips to investigative journalism. Radio 1, 2 and 3 also feature documentaries but fewer of them, and, as with all BBC broadcasting, it's a highly competitive market.

But, don't let that put you off. Your work, your ideas and your comments as experts and thoughtful commentators are essential to, perhaps even the bedrock, of those programmes. As a BBC Staff current affairs producer for nearly twenty years, I would constantly reach for my little black book of LSE experts to find or help me through stories I could broadcast.

For pretty much every academic specialism that exists there is a Radio 4 programme with a very similar brief. So if you're into international law, *Law in Action* might become your new best friend. If you're the leading expert on financial matters, there is a long list of programming you could explore – *In Business*, *The Bottom Line* and many others. Once you've identified the best fit, listen to the programme and the credits and make a note of the producer's name. If you want to take the next step, that's probably the person to get in touch with in the first instance.

But before you pick up the phone, decide what it is you want from this experience. Do you want to present, be a commentator, be interviewed or remain in the background?

Be honest with yourself. If you like to think on your feet – and are good at it – then put yourself forward for live radio. But be realistic. Live radio might equal the *Today* programme or other news magazine programmes. So if you're not comfortable with being put on the spot or you don't relish the adrenalin rush, don't do it!

Be honest with the broadcaster. If you don't respond well to being called up at 4am to discuss an item for the Today programme, make sure they know that. Your most public calling card these days is probably your digital profile. So, if you're not great in the early hours, put something on there to say that. Most often, your first contact with a radio programme will be a call from a – possibly harrassed – inexperienced researcher, trying to get up to speed on a difficult topic, or book a guest at very short notice. If you can help them, with a briefing or contacts, they will be eternally grateful. But if you don't have the time or inclination then let them down gently. That way, you're still in the market when the next opportunity comes along.

Consider whether it's you or your work that you want to be centre stage. It can, of course, be both, but it doesn't have to be. You can offer your research or your expertise as the backbone for a radio programme or a discussion without ever appearing on air – if that's what you want.

Be thick-skinned. If they don't book you, it's probably nothing personal. But if you get into a strop about it, they certainly won't be getting in touch again any time soon.

Go into it with your eyes open. You know the broadcaster wants is informative entertainment. They don't want to misrepresent or manipulate you but you need to work within their world. So, for instance, if you turn up for a live news interview with a dry, academic essay you're proposing to deliver in its entirety, your relationship with the broadcasters is likely to be a short one.

And that, in my book, is what you want to be aiming for – building a long-lasting, mutually productive relationship between you and broadcast producers. And, by the way, don't expect to make any money. The fees are tiny or non-existent. But the benefits are huge. You get to engage with other interesting thinkers. You might find yourself at the centre of a game-changing story or debate. Audience figures are anything from 200 thousand to several million – compare that to your average readership of an academic paper. And you never know, you might find you have a whole new career in front of you.

This piece is part of a series of posts from a one-day workshop, ***Communicating impact: the role of news and media*** *hosted by The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). The workshop is part of the ESRC's capacity-building programme for the Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) community and focuses on ways in which the research community can communicate research findings and expert*

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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About the Authors

David Walker is a Journalist, Broadcaster and Author. David Walker edits 'Public', the Guardian's monthly magazine for senior public sector executives. Before joining the Guardian, David worked for The Independent, The Times and The Economist, specialising in UK domestic policy and administration.

Fran Abrams is the Chief Executive of the Education Media Centre. Fran began reporting on education for the Birmingham Post and Mail in 1988, and went on to be Education Correspondent of the Sunday Times, the Sunday Correspondent, the Sunday Telegraph and the Independent. She later worked as Westminster Correspondent of the Independent. For the past 15 years she has been part of the reporting team on BBC Radio 4′s File on 4 programme as well as writing articles on education for the Guardian and a range of other publications. Her five published books include two on education: Seven Kings, published by Atlantic Books in 2006, and Learning to Fail, published by Routledge in 2010.

Dinah Lammiman worked nearly twenty years on staff at the BBC, mostly as a Senior Broadcast Journalist, making radio and TV current affairs programmes including Law in Action, investigative series: 5Live Report, the Matrix of Power and Crossing Continents. She also presented numerous TV documentaries for BBC2 about politicians and parliamentary affairs. And she facilitated creativity workshops, led internal strategies and worked on new programme formats. Since going freelance, Dinah has continued to present and produce radio documentaries including Life as an Old New Mum. She's a director at Jolt Productions, who make documentaries, most recently with Hugh Dennis about his Great Uncle's experience in Gallipoli. And she's also diversified into creating digital interpretation for cultural institutions and attractions using her story-telling skills, ability to devise innovative products and manage ambitious projects. Dinah has just completed a project, working with the BBC on an installation for the Tribeca Film Festival housing a virtual reality immersive sound project. See PastPorte or hear her work here Tweet her at: @dinahlammiman